

## Geopolitics and Grand Strategy

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### Reader's Guide

Geopolitics and grand strategy are modern concepts of statecraft associated with the rise and decline of Great Powers. This chapter looks at the concept of geopolitics and its significance for grand strategy. It does so by tracing the development of the concepts and showing how the meaning of the concepts evolved in response to changing world historical contexts. It explains why geopolitics and grand strategy are associated with the politics of Great Powers and why these concepts are currently making a comeback. The chapter then goes on to discuss the pitfalls and problems associated with formulating a grand strategy, and why geopolitics is as much about interpretation as it is about objective geographical factors.

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# Introduction

The idea that world politics is ultimately driven by competition between a small number of Great Powers has recently been making a comeback. For more than a decade after the end of the cold war, it had been possible to believe that the rivalry between Great Powers was being replaced with the benign hegemony of the United States, the guarantor of a new liberal world order. As US President Clinton proclaimed in 1992, 'In a world where freedom, not tyranny, is on the march, the cynical calculus of power politics does not compute. It is ill-suited to a new era' (Clinton 1992). However, this picture no longer captures the dynamics of international politics. As Russia is at loggerheads with the West and China is becoming increasingly assertive, geopolitical rivalries are once again returning to the centre stage of world affairs. Nor is this just about military sabre-rattling in a few far-flung regions of the world. Partly as a result of increased economic interdependence since the end of the cold war, some non-Western states, first and foremost China, have gone through a sustained period of accelerated economic growth. In the meantime, the US and other major Western economies have suffered relative economic decline, a development accelerated by the effects of the global economic crisis of 2008.

In response, there have been calls for a new grand strategy to preserve the power of the United States in the face of this emerging challenge to its global dominance, with a renewed focus on geopolitics to counter the rise of China and other regional powers in the non-Western world. In the broadest sense, geopolitics is about the political implications of geographical space, the way that geography may contribute to conflict or convey strategic advantages. In association with grand strategy, it is a concept that is intimately connected to the idea of Great Powers as central actors in world affairs.

## ***Grand Strategy and geography***

Grand strategy is an evolution of strategy away from a narrow focus on victory in war towards a much broader, more long-term vision that is essentially political in nature (see [Box 17.1](#)). The strategist and historian Paul Kennedy sees the essence of grand strategy in deliberating the proper balance of priorities of a state by coordinating ends and means (Kennedy 1991). Although security remains central, grand strategy is not limited to military strategy. Security in the context of grand strategy may be understood as securing and

enhancing the state's interests, and securing it against external threats and possible opponents. Grand strategy draws on all the military, diplomatic, cultural, and economic means and instruments at the state's disposal. In the most basic terms, it refers to a long-term, multi-dimensional plan for securing and enhancing a state's power and prosperity. It is associated with states that have a wide range of global interests and a number of resources that can be mobilized, including the use of force. As the historian and strategist Williamson Murray put it, 'grand strategy is a matter involving great states and great states alone' (Murray 2011: 1). However, it also implies a situation where resources are limited and where the leader of a powerful state has to make strategic, long-term choices about how to selectively invest resources and project its power.

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### **BOX 17.1** Evolving Definitions of Grand Strategy and Geopolitics

#### **Grand Strategy**

Grand strategy should both calculate and develop the economic resources and manpower of nations in order to sustain the fighting services. [. . .] it should not only combine the various instruments, but so regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace—for its security and prosperity.

Sir Basil Liddell Hart (1935)

Strategy is the art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation [. . .] including its armed forces to the end that its vital interest shall be effectively promoted and secured against enemies, actual, potential or merely presumed. The highest type of strategy—sometimes called grand strategy—is that which so integrates the policies and armaments of the nation that the resort to war is either rendered unnecessary or is undertaken with the maximum chance of victory.

Edward Mead Earle (1943)

The crux of grand strategy lies therefore in policy, that is, the capacity of the nation's leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and non-military, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation's long-term (that is, in wartime and peacetime) best interests.

In a world where great states confront overstretch, they must make hard choices. Thus, in the end, grand strategy is more often than not about the ability to adjust to the reality that resources, will, and interests inevitably find themselves out of balance in some areas.

Williamson Murray (2011)

As far as a world power like America is concerned, a grand strategy involves first imagining some future world order within which the nation's standing, prosperity and security are significantly enhanced, and then plotting and maintaining a course to that desired end while employing—to the fullest extent possible—all elements of our nation's power toward generating those conditions. Naturally, such grand goals typically take decades to achieve.

Thomas P. Barnett (2011)

Strategy is oriented towards the future. It is a declaration of intent and an indication of the possible means required to fulfil that intent. But once strategy moves beyond the near term, it struggles to define exactly what it intends to do. [. . .] The operational plans of military strategy look to the near term and work with specific situations. Grand strategy, on the other hand, can entertain ambitions and goals that are more visionary and aspirational than pragmatic and immediate.

Hew Strachan (2011)

## Geopolitics

For the first time we can perceive something of the real proportion of features and events on the stage of the whole world, and may seek a formula which shall express certain aspects [. . .] of geographical causation in universal history.

Halford Mackinder (1904)

Not by accident is the word 'Politik' preceded by that little prefix 'geo.' This prefix . . . relates politics to the soil. It rids politics of arid theories and senseless phrases which might trap our political leaders into hopeless utopias. It puts them back on solid ground. Geopolitik demonstrates the dependence of all

political developments on the permanent reality of the soil.

Karl Haushofer (1942)

Geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states, because it is the most permanent.

Nicholas Spykman (1942)

1. All politics is geopolitics. 2. All strategy is geostrategy. 3. Geography is ‘out there’ objectively as environment or ‘terrain.’ 4. Geography also is ‘within us,’ in here, as imagined spatial relationships.

Colin Gray (1999a)

The geopolitical imagination [...] has never exercised absolute power over the course of world politics, in the sense of transcending the effects of technological, economic and other material determinants [...] the modern geopolitical imagination has, however, provided meaning and rationalization to practice by political élites the world over. It has defined the ‘ideological space,’ to use Immanuel Wallerstein’s phrase, from which the geographic categories upon which the world is organized and works are derived.

John Agnew (2003)

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In all of this, geography matters. Trade and communication routes are strategically important for large, economically powerful states, as is the location of natural resources. Any projection of power will have a geographical focus, since no state has the resources to be equally engaged everywhere at the same time. There is an important cultural component to this geographical factor—the outlooks of British and continental policymakers differ dramatically, partly because of Britain’s position as an island at the margin of the continent. Technological changes have significantly altered the significance of this geographic factor over the last century, but the image of Britain as an island remains powerful and is influential in Britain’s relations with Europe today (see [Box 17.2](#)).

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### **BOX 17.2** The Persistence of Identity Narratives: Britain as an Island

The idea of being an island has shaped British foreign policy for centuries. In the past, Britain’s island status

and its focus on sea power was central to the maintenance of the British Empire. It also meant that Britain was perceived to be separate from the rest of Europe. This might seem obvious: after all, Britain is physically separated from the continent by the English Channel. But while this separateness is reflected in identity narratives, British and continental European histories have always been intertwined through trade, invasions, and shared culture.

Britain's island identity has remained significant in British politics to this day, even though technological change, not least the channel tunnel, has vastly diminished physical distance. During debates about whether Britain should join the European Communities (now the European Union) in the 1960s, British politicians wondered whether Britain was really a part of Europe, and if joining would mean separation from the rest of the world. In the late 1980s Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher frequently depicted Britain as an island separate from Europe, with more in common with other English-speaking places like the US, Canada, and Australia.

The vote for Brexit in 2016 has brought Britain's island identity to the fore once more as the referendum indicated a small majority in favour of separation from the EU. Although a divisive issue amongst the public and politicians, Prime Minister Theresa May has looked to approach the issue by announcing the return of 'Global Britain', in which Britain is the hub of a global trading network. This posture recalls classic imperial themes of maritime Britain, partially distanced from Europe while at the centre of a worldwide network, managed by 'lines of communication' connecting it to places like India, Singapore, and Australia.

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## **Imperial Competition and the Invention of Geopolitics**

Geopolitics and grand strategy are practical political concepts rather than academic theories. They do however share a focus on the politics of Great Powers and an emphasis on statecraft with classical Realism (see introductory chapter by Baylis and Wirtz). They also share the assumption that there are timeless patterns of state behaviour that can be uncovered and used as guidance for policymakers' decisions—patterns that are at least in part determined by geography. In line with this anchoring in classical Realist thought, grand strategy is often depicted as a way of thinking that applies across all times and all places. This is not the case. Grand

strategy and geopolitics are distinctly modern and European concepts of statecraft, emerging as approaches to international politics only at a time when European and later US power acquired global reach. As the British geographer Halford Mackinder put it in 1904, by the turn of the twentieth century international politics for the first time had become a ‘closed political system [...] of world-wide scope’ (Mackinder 1904: 27). The development of geopolitics and grand strategy occurred in this context.

Mackinder’s observation described a genuinely new development that reflected the imperial expansion of the European powers. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain, France, the Russian empire, and a number of latecomers to the imperial game were mapping and reclaiming most parts of the globe, often in competition with each other. By this point, the development of the European system of states had produced a small number of particularly powerful states, the Great Powers, which claimed special responsibility for managing international affairs. The colonial expansion of European Great Powers ushered in a new global competition, as unmapped and unclaimed parts of the globe became increasingly scarce. The ‘scramble for Africa’ between Britain, France, and other European powers and the colonial ‘Great Game’ in Central Asia between the British and the Russian empire heightened international tensions.

### ***Geography and the management of empire***

Imperial expansion highlighted the importance of geographical factors. Increasingly far-flung supply and trade routes by land and sea needed to be secured to enable economic growth at home. Overseas territories rich in natural resources were seen as strategic necessities for enhancing the prosperity and power of colonial states. Colonial expansion fuelled capitalist development and enabled the British Empire to become a global hegemonic power. But by the last decades of the nineteenth century, both the newly unified German state and the United States were rapidly industrializing and began to challenge Britain’s economic dominance. Germany in particular was becoming a disruptive force in international political dynamics still dominated by the European powers. As a latecomer to the circle of European Great Powers, the German Reich had missed out on much of the colonial expansion, but its leaders set out to change that by aggressive global politics. This included investing heavily in naval rearmament—potentially challenging British naval power at the same time as Britain acquired ever more far-flung possessions in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.

The increasingly tense international situation at the turn of the twentieth century was reflected in attempts by

various European and American thinkers to systematically explain international affairs by reference to geography. The American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that sea power was of crucial strategic importance and advocated that the US join the imperial scramble. Partly due to his influence, the US entered the naval arms race and became engaged in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. In contrast, Mackinder, a geographer and politician, was worried about Britain's long-term decline. He believed that new technologies such as the railways were increasing the strategic significance of land over sea, increasing the power of Germany and the Russian empire and threatening the global dominance of Britain, which largely relied on sea power. He declared one area in particular to be central to global dominance: the Eurasian Heartland, comprising large parts of Russia and Central Asia (see [Figure 17.1](#)).

### **Figure 17.1** Mackinder's View of the Heartland

Source: H.J. Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1904, p. 435.

Mackinder condensed his theory into a famous, and still influential, quote: 'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island: Who rules the World Island commands the World' (Mackinder 1919). The size of countries and the importance of population growth was the main concern of German geographers, most notoriously Friedrich Ratzel, who developed the concept of *Lebensraum* ('living space') which later became central in Hitler's geopolitical thinking. Ratzel posited a historical difference between the settled Aryan races populating German territory and the marauding tribes to the east that threatened them. He proposed that modern Germany should secure additional land and resources to counter an ever-present threat from Russia. Rudolph Kiellen, the Swedish geographer who first coined the term *Geopolitik* (geopolitics) combined elements of these theories in his claim that states have to face two strategic imperatives to survive and thrive: demography, or the management of people (*ethnopolitik*), and the management of territorial expansion (*geopolitik*).

### ***Geopolitical competition for survival***

These classical geopolitical theories reflected prevalent ideas of their time. They grew out of a belief that everything, including international politics, could be understood scientifically by uncovering the causal factors that drive the behaviour of human beings and states. Geography was seen as such an objective factor in



world politics. By virtue of natural resources, climate, location, and size, strategic advantages were bestowed on some states, while others were trapped in unfavourable conditions. However, this was also a time of rapid technological change fuelled by scientific discovery, and this was reflected in the concern of Mac-kinder and others with technology and its interaction with geography. Importantly, these thinkers saw competition as the essence of world politics, pitting states against each other in a race for global dominance. What was at stake was survival—the idea that only the strongest, most resourceful states would continue to exist. This vision was influenced by a popular pseudo-scientific theory of the time, Social Darwinism. It revolved around the idea that there is a process of natural selection, a fight for the survival of the fittest and strongest, not just among species but also between peoples and states. Germany and the United States in particular were cast as vigorous and rapidly growing, while established powers such as Britain and France were exhausted and in decline.

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### **Key Points**

- The emergence of geopolitics reflected a new sense that the world was now a unified political space at the end of the nineteenth century, which emerged as a result of the imperial competition of European Great Powers.
- It also reflected a shifting constellation of power, with British economic strength in decline and Germany and the United States rising as new powerful actors in world politics.
- Classical geopolitical thought links territory to power and sees world politics as a competition between the most powerful states. It proposes that geographical and other environmental factors explain why some states thrive while others decline.

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## **World War II, the Cold War, and the Development of Grand Strategy**

From the start, geopolitical thought was about strategy—geographic factors were thought to determine the behaviour of states over long periods of time and could therefore be drawn on for the formulation of a strat-

egy over decades. In the interwar years, this expansion of the strategic horizon was reflected in the new concept of grand strategy (see [Box 17.1](#)). Basil Liddell Hart, the British military historian who first coined the phrase, referred to grand strategy as the ‘higher level’ of wartime strategy, coordinating all the resources at a state’s disposal towards the political ends of a war. After the outbreak of World War II, the term was adopted by American strategists, in particular Edward Mead Earle, whose thoughts on grand strategy remained influential for decades to come. Another wartime advocate of a US grand strategy, Nicholas Spykman, adopted Mackinder’s theory of the heartland to respond to the looming conflict with the Soviet Union at the end of the war. Arguing that control over the ‘rimland’, Central Europe, would decide the fate of world politics, he urged US policymakers to remain engaged in Europe to counter possible Soviet dominance of the continent.

Both Mead Earle and Spykman responded to the growing threat of a large-scale confrontation with the Soviet Union, which became a reality as World War II drew to an end. Spykman’s admonition did become US policy, and as the cold war unfolded, a grand strategy inspired by a geopolitical view of the world remained one of its guiding principles. From the start, the cold war was a global struggle with specific regional geopolitical dynamics. Stalin installed communist leaders in the newly liberated states of Eastern Europe and integrated these states into a Soviet-led alliance system that was motivated by geopolitics as much as ideology. This was mirrored in the development of the US strategic doctrine of containment, which similarly applied a geopolitical rationale to the ideological focus of the cold war, and remained in place until the demise of the Soviet Union (see [Box 17.3](#)).

### ***The revival of geopolitical thinking after World War II***

Given the global scope of the cold war and its long-term strategic horizon, it may seem surprising that the actual concepts of geopolitics and grand strategy were by no means central tenets of strategic thinking during the cold war and fell out of use for decades, to be revived only in the 1970s and 1980s. In part, this reflected the way that geopolitical ideas had become thoroughly de-legitimized by their association with Nazi Germany. Another factor was the start of the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States, which seemed to obliterate the geographical factor in world politics. As both sides developed inter-continental ballistic missile systems capable of destroying each other’s cities in a matter of hours, a grand

strategy based on geopolitical considerations—such as the difference between land power and sea power—seemed obsolete. In fact, deterrence, the foundation of US military strategy during the cold war, had no connection to geopolitical reasoning; it was purely based on out-arming and out-spending the Soviet Union, expanding nuclear and conventional capabilities to deter the Soviet Union from using its own nuclear weapons.

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### **BOX 17.3** Containment

Containment was first developed at the onset of the cold war by George F. Kennan, a diplomat who had studied the Soviet Union closely. He proposed a strategy which relied on countering Soviet influence ‘by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points’ (Kennan 1947). By the 1950s, the competition for spheres of influence between the United States and the Soviet Union acquired a global dimension, partly as a result of decolonization in Africa and Asia. Containment was reformulated and expanded into what became known as ‘domino theory’—the idea that Soviet influence had to be countered everywhere, since one state turning communist could easily spread communism to neighbouring states until an entire world region would fall. Containment was a form of geopolitics, but one which encompassed ideological competition as well as competition for resources. It required the US to engage across all areas of the globe to stop the spread of communism, whether or not the countries concerned were strategically important. In Vietnam in particular, hundreds of thousands of US soldiers were sent to help fight communist guerrillas in a costly, drawn-out, and ultimately unsuccessful war. Overall, containment was a consistent, if not always consistently implemented, grand strategic framework that was remarkably long-lived. Since the Soviet Union remained the much weaker economy, containment was an effective long-term strategy that helped to drain Soviet resources, though it was by no means the only factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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By the 1970s, as the economic burden of the nuclear arms race began to be felt in the US, and it seemed for a while that the Soviet Union would become the dominant military power, geopolitics began to be re-evaluated in US policy circles. This revival was associated in particular with two influential figures, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Kissinger, as national security advisor to President Nixon, was the architect of warmer

relations with communist China, a policy that was later expanded by Brzezinski. Kissinger's understanding of geopolitics as Great Power politics was influenced by a deep knowledge of European history and the varying ways in which the balance of power between the European Great Powers had played out over centuries. He believed in the continuing relevance of power balancing as a principle of international politics. Brzezinski's understanding of geopolitics drew more explicitly on Mackinder's heartland theory. Like Mackinder, he saw control over the Eurasian landmass as central to world domination and eventual victory in the cold war. Both Kissinger and Brzezinski advocated a move away from the bipolar stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union towards a more dynamic multipolar order by engaging with communist China, which a decade earlier had fallen out with the Soviet Union over questions of communist doctrine. A US–Chinese rapprochement was aimed at weakening the grip of the Soviet Union over the Eurasian landmass, and above all at preventing a mending of relations between the two communist countries which would have led to absolute Soviet dominance of the Eurasian continent.

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### **Key Points**

- The concept of Grand Strategy was first developed in the context of World War II and was an extension of the long-term strategic view inherent in geopolitical thought.
- Both the Soviet Union and the United States acted geopolitically during the cold war. Containment was a grand strategy informed by geopolitical reasoning, but driven by ideological concerns rather than resource competition.
- The revival of geopolitics in the 1970s occurred at a time when the US was seen to be in relative decline, and means other than the nuclear arms race were sought to secure its position.

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## **Geopolitics and Grand Strategy Today**

Geopolitics and grand strategy as concepts of statecraft first emerged at a specific historical constellation: the long-term decline of a hegemonic power and the rise of new challengers. There are parallels between the

situation of the British empire at the turn of the twentieth century and the global position of the United States today. The period of global primacy that the US enjoyed after the cold war may not be over, but global shifts are unfolding that make it appear less durable and absolute than a decade ago. As in the case of imperial Britain, this is driven by relative economic decline. The inexorable economic rise of China, now the world's second largest economy, was accelerated by the global economic crisis of 2008, which many emerging economies weathered better than Europe and the United States. Nor is this just an issue of Chinese economic growth. Over the last two decades, the combined GDP of the Group of Seven industrialized nations as a percentage of the world's total has decreased from over 70 per cent to 50 per cent (Laub and McBride 2017). This redistribution of global wealth away from the US and Western Europe towards the major developing economies in the global South is unprecedented in the modern era.

Consequences of this shift are beginning to affect international politics. As the US academic Jon Alterman put it, China's demands are now 'too large not to affect the global environment, and its external vulnerabilities are too large to rely on others to defend them' (Alterman 2013: 2). Familiar geopolitical themes, such as the need to secure resources, are driving China's new global engagement. China is poor in energy resources and aims to secure supplies for its expanding economy. It is now the world's second largest consumer of oil and its demand for gas is rapidly increasing (US Energy Information Administration International Energy Outlook 2017). The presence of China in regions such as the Middle East and its growing energy relationship with Russia has broader geopolitical implications. It gives new leverage to regional players the US has been trying to isolate, such as Syria and Iran, and provides the backdrop for Russia's continued assertiveness over Ukraine. China's current reliance on energy supplied via sea routes controlled by the United States has been driving regional tensions over Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea (see [Box 17.4](#)).

### ***Challenges to US dominance***

Unlike Germany in the 1890s, neither China nor Russia is directly challenging the US in military terms, and would not be in a position to do so. US defence spending is in decline, but the United States remains the world's largest military power by far, accounting for more than a third of total global military expenditure in 2016 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, 2017). Yet, both China and Russia are rearming. Russia is currently embarking on an ambitious programme of military modernization, while

China is increasing its defence spending by double digits each year. And as Russia's stand-off with the West over Syria and Ukraine and China's stance in the South China Sea demonstrate, both are increasingly willing to challenge regional security orders sustained by the United States. In addition, as the territorial order imposed by Western colonial powers is breaking down in the Middle East, Iran is seizing its chance to extend its regional influence and challenge the dominance of US allies such as Saudi Arabia. In all these regions, new security issues are becoming intertwined with more traditional geopolitical challenges to US primacy.

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#### **BOX 17.4** The US 'Pivot to Asia'

The US 'Pivot to Asia', a major strategic shift to a renewed engagement in East Asia, was partly motivated by a wish to curb increasing Chinese assertiveness in the region. China has been staking out territorial claims over islands in the South China Sea, to secure maritime shipping routes as well as potential energy resources in the maritime shelf belonging to these islands. It has increased its naval presence and started to invest heavily in building up a blue water navy. This has led to tensions with some of its neighbours, in particular Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan—the latter being two key US military allies in the region. The military dimension of the pivot may be contributing to a 'spiral of insecurity' in which the other side reacts to a perceived threat by building up its own military capacities. Partly in response to the pivot, China has accelerated and expanded its naval armament. Japan, China's traditional adversary in the region, has been encouraged by the renewed US engagement to escalate its own simmering tensions with China and is pushing for re-militarization. While the pivot may have reassured America's partners and thwarted Chinese ambitions in the short term, the result has been a negative transformation of the overall security dynamics of the region.

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#### **BOX 17.5** Russia, Ukraine, and the West

The continuing stand-off between Russia and the West over influence in Ukraine seems to confirm

Brzezinski's dictum that Ukraine is a 'pivot state' because of its sensitive geopolitical location (Brzezinski 1997). While Ukraine's strategic location is important to Russia, Russia's meddling in Eastern Ukraine is not explained by a focus on resources and geostrategy alone. Ukraine has a central place in Russian identity narratives; after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Russians found it hard to accept Ukrainian independence. Putin's project of a Eurasian economic union was partly designed to bind Ukraine to Russia and stop its move towards closer association with the EU. The immediate context that triggered the Ukrainian crisis in 2013 was then president Victor Yanukovich's intention to sign an association (trade) agreement with the EU. This was not a geopolitical zero-sum game—the trade agreement and the Eurasian economic union were not mutually exclusive. But relations between Russia and the EU had deteriorated, partly as a result of EU support for the democratic 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine and the 'conservative turn' and erosion of Russian democracy under Putin. There is now a clear rejection by the Kremlin of a liberal European identity for Russia—and Russia is attempting to export this illiberalism by supporting far-right movements across Europe. In terms of broader geopolitics of identity, the EU stands for the West, Russia's external 'Other' against which Russian identity is defined. The association agreement was perceived in Moscow in terms of these geopolitics of identity, as a move to join a liberal Western 'Other'. Ukraine is pivotal because of the meaning attached to it by Russian policymakers, which in turn links to broader perceptions of the relationship between Russia and the West.

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In this complex strategic environment, a number of commentators have argued that the United States suffers from 'imperial overstretch', a term coined by Paul Kennedy for a situation where excessive defence budgets undermine the prosperity of a country and weaken it internationally as a result (Kennedy 1988). While the proportion of US defence spending in relation to GDP is still less than that of many smaller states, stagnant economic growth since the global economic crisis means that bloated defence budgets are becoming a problem. At the same time, the diverging nature of the actual and potential threats presented by transnational terrorism and other non-state actors and the revival of geopolitical competition mean that there are increasingly hard choices to be made about how to invest limited resources.

## ***Evolving understandings of Great Power competition***

The emphasis on peacetime development reflects shifting understandings of Great Power competition and Great Power war since 1945. Before World War I, wars between Great Powers were frequent and limited in scale, and often used to effect power transitions. However, World War I and World War II showed that military technology had developed to a point where war between major industrialized states involved exorbitant social and economic costs. This was exacerbated by the arrival of atomic weapons at the onset of the cold war. A highly interdependent global economy has further diminished the returns and increased the costs of Great Power war. Partly as a result of these developments, there has been no direct war between major powers since 1945. It is therefore not surprising that the current discourse on rising powers has foregrounded relative economic development over simple rankings of military capabilities. The broader aim of securing the prosperity and power of the polity may or may not mean a major role for defence and the armed forces—it depends on the nature of the strategic environment, which determines how these aims can be achieved.

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### **Key Points**

- The rise of China and the relative economic decline of the US are driving the current revival of interest in geopolitics and grand strategy.
- China's economic expansion and its need for energy supplies are already having an effect on political dynamics in various regions of the world.
- The US remains militarily dominant. Russia, China and some other states are rearming, but at present this is not a direct challenge.
- It has been argued that the US suffers from 'imperial overstretch', spending so much on its defence budget that it is weakened overall.
- The emphasis of grand strategy has shifted to peacetime development, partly because war between Great Powers now seems improbable.

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# Grand Strategy in a Complex World

It is not difficult to find declarations of long-term strategic ambitions in the public statements of policy-makers, especially those representing major powers. However, a proliferation of strategic documents and the declaration of lofty aims are not necessarily an indication that a grand strategy exists and is being implemented. The historical record is patchy. As Williamson Murray remarked, ‘those who have developed successful grand strategies in the past have been very much the exception . . . a strategic framework, much less a grand strategy has rarely guided those responsible for the long-term survival of the state’ (Murray 2011: 3). There are many obstacles to the successful formulation of a grand strategy, let alone its implementation, in an uncertain and complex international environment. A grand strategy is by its very nature comprehensive, encompassing in the words of one author ‘a clear understanding of the nature of the international environment, a country’s highest goals and interests within that environment, the primary threats to those goals and interests, and the way that finite resources can be used to deal with competing challenges and opportunities’ (Brands 2014: 13). A grand strategist must understand and assess an exceptionally broad range of factors, individually and in relation to each other. As Lawrence Freedman has pointed out, this is a problematic assumption (Freedman 2013). There are limitations related to the imperfect functioning of the machinery of the state within which the grand strategist must operate. The information reaching the decision maker from the lower levels of bureaucracy may be incomplete or biased, and the gap between formulation and implementation of policies is exponentially increased in a strategy aimed at guiding policy over a long period of time in diverse and evolving circumstances. Even assuming a perfectly operational decision-making environment, the level of complexity involved in formulating a grand strategy poses questions about its feasibility. The holistic assessment of such a broad range of factors may simply surpass the limits of human intelligence. It certainly raises questions about contingency and predictability in a system as complex as the international environment.

## ***Contextualising grand strategy***

A grand strategy is a guiding framework that allows policymakers to steer through the uncertainties of a complex international environment. Finding such a framework becomes more difficult the more uncertain

this environment is and the more it presents different and sometimes mutually incompatible strategic challenges. It is not a coincidence that conceptions of grand strategy first emerged at a time when the range of actors posing a potential threat to Britain and the United States was limited and the threat was clear. The idea of a grand strategy bears the imprint of its time, in particular in implicit assumptions about just how clear and consensual the interests and goals of a state really are. The current revival of thinking about grand strategy faces a very different scenario from that of the cold war—in fact, calls for a new grand strategy for the United States have arisen precisely because of this new complexity (see Critical Thinking). Moreover, the ends of a grand strategy, in the most general sense of defining the national interest, have also become more difficult to formulate in the absence of a single overarching threat. While there is a connection between primacy and prosperity, the precise balance is ultimately a political decision and open to political contestation, especially where competing demands are made on finite resources.

Even where ends are reasonably clear, the long-term nature of grand strategy and the complexity of the global environment make it difficult to employ adequate means and formulate concrete policies. In a complex system, there will be contingencies and unpredictable events with multiple interdependent causes, sometimes the future unintended consequences of strategic decisions taken today. These contingencies may escalate into ‘black swan’ events: improbable, large-scale events that have transformative effects and are largely unpredictable to a given set of observers (Taleb and Blythe 2011). In fact, contingent events are commonplace in international history and are often the cause of major upheavals. The collapse of the Soviet Union and 9/11 both fall into this category; informed observers failed to predict them, and their consequences changed the dynamics of international politics. By definition, there can be no planning for the surprising and unexpected, though grand strategies should provide guiding principles for making sense of and responding to these kinds of large-scale events. However, there is a real danger that the interpretative ‘lenses’ provided by a grand strategy may blind the decision-maker to the transformative consequences of a contingent event and thus prevent rather than enable an adequate reaction. The line between a clear guiding principle and rigidity is thin, and can have far-reaching consequences when crossed. A grand strategy that fails to grasp how a contingent event changes the dynamics of international interaction, or that has identified trends in world politics wrongly from the outset, may trigger the very kind of develop-

ment it set out to avoid. Strategic decisions are applied in context, in a highly dynamic international environment populated by other actors that inevitably react to policy moves directed at them (see [Box 17.4](#)).

### ***Strategic horizons in the modern world***

Policymakers are well aware of the uncertainties of their decision-making environment. Since the end of the cold war, strategic documents make habitual reference to the complexity of the international environment and stress the need for adaptability and flexibility in strategic planning. Given its extended time horizon, grand strategy must be able to adapt to changing contexts in a complex and always evolving international system. However, if flexibility and adaptability are key, is the formulation of long-term holistic frameworks a useful endeavour? Critics of the idea of grand strategy have pointed out that it is too general and the international environment too complex for it to be of much use in concrete situations facing the decision-maker (Strachan 2011; Krasner 2010; Dombrowski and Reich 2017). And yet, while the difficulties inherent in grand strategic thinking are immense, in a modern state the lack of an overall strategic direction can be even more detrimental. This remains true above all for Great Powers, which will by definition have a wide variety of divergent and sometimes contradictory interests in far-flung locations, but rarely enough resources to cover all of them.

In the absence of a grand strategic framework, strategic decisions will still be made, but the risk that they will be based on short-term pressures or on unexamined bias increases. Frequently, the result may be non-decisions, ‘muddling through’ as a result of bureaucratic inertia, or policies formulated on the basis of past approaches wholly inadequate for a changing strategic context (Lindblom 1959). This kind of non-decision can have far-reaching consequences. The failure to formulate a new European security architecture that could bind in a newly democratic Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union is a case in point. Instead, NATO, the cold war institution that had been created explicitly to defend Western Europe against the Soviet Union, reformulated its mission statement and was enlarged eastwards. The unintended consequence of NATO enlargement and further NATO actions in Europe, especially the bombardment of Serbia over Kosovo in 1999, was a strengthening of nationalist and anti-Western forces in Russia and an increasingly fraught relationship with the West. William Clinton, the US president endorsing these decisions, did not believe in the idea of grand strategy (Brands 2014). The initial decision to enlarge seems to have been driven mainly

by persistent lobbying by the smaller East European states and a vague sense that this would help consolidate a liberal community of values in Europe (Schimmelpfennig 2000). Somewhat ironically given what has been said about the pitfalls of grand strategy, its long-term horizon and holistic approach may be necessary to recognize the dangerous implications of short-term decisions responding to past contexts.

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### **Key Points**

- In a complex and fluid world, it has become much more difficult to formulate grand strategies.
- Rigid grand strategies, or those based on the wrong assumptions, can have negative consequences, since they blind decision-makers to unpredictable changes in the strategic environment.
- For a large powerful state, grand strategic planning may be necessary, since the effects of simply ‘muddling through’ may be worse.

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## **Rethinking Geopolitics**

The grand strategist must be flexible and adaptable, but also look out for persistent structures that allow him or her to specify strategic aims. The original association between geopolitics and grand strategy derives exactly from this conundrum. Constants such as a state’s size, location, climate, and resources were seen as objective constraining and enabling factors that allowed predictions of a state’s power and influence. Even though the scientific credentials of this kind of geographical determinism have long since been called into question, geography remains inextricably intertwined with the making of grand strategy. For one, grand strategy has to be geographically specific in the sense of being located in and directed at a specific context. Factors of physical geography, like the size of states, their location and their neighbours, remain fundamentally important in this regard. The isolated geographical position of the United States, without major competitors or threats in close proximity, provides security but also makes it logistically difficult to project power. On the other hand, Russia’s open and porous borders, its proximity to major competitors, and its harsh climate are all potential vulnerabilities. A state’s access to resources also re-

mains central, and hydrocarbon resources in particular are as important now as they were when classical geopolitical thinkers first constructed their theories. Nevertheless, resource bases, just as other aspects of physical geography, are not a fixed and unchanging factor of world politics. Currently, a major strategic shift is under way as a result of new technologies for the exploitation of non-conventional energy resources. It makes the United States less dependent on oil from the Middle East; in fact, the US is becoming a net energy exporter (IEA World Energy Outlook 2017). As this example illustrates, seemingly permanent geographic factors such as the location of resources can be altered by the development of new technologies. The interaction between geography and technological change is a central feature of geopolitics.

Nevertheless, simply focussing on the relationship between geography and technology fails to capture a central way in which geography becomes relevant to world politics. The geographical context within which policymaking necessarily orients itself not only refers to factors of physical geography. As the strategist Colin Gray put it, ‘Although there is a brute force existentiality to physical geography, as a generalization it is geography in the mind, of the imagination, that matters most. [...] The geography is as unarguable as its perceived political meaning is contestable’ (Gray 2013: 118). Brute geographical facts acquire their significance in cultural and social contexts. This starts with the fact that cultures and civilizations are located in particular geographical spaces. On a different scale, human beings attach meaning to places, meaning that can become politically and strategically significant. Often, especially where particular sites and territories are part of narratives of collective identity, these interpretations can become powerful mobilizing factors. This has been true for the many ethnic conflicts of the post-cold war world. But identity and territory are also linked in the nation-state, and interpretations of geography can be and often are a powerful influence on foreign policymaking. Often, these identity narratives are about dynamics of ‘Othering’, the inclusion in or exclusion from an imagined geopolitical space. The relationship between Russia and the ‘West’ (in itself such an imagined space, comprising countries and institutions supporting a US-dominated liberal order) is a case in point (see [Box 17.5](#)).

### ***Geopolitics and identity***

The role played by interpretation and identity complicates the uses of geography for the making of grand

strategy. Yet, the effects of geography are inescapable in international politics, whether they are the ‘brute force’ of geographical constraints in a given strategic context, or the role played by interpretations of geography. There clearly is value in reflecting on the way that decision-makers’ interpretations of geography may affect their formulation of strategy, as well as in understanding the meaning particular geographic factors have for an adversary. As the persistent identity of Britain as an island nation illustrates, specific interpretations of geography in a narrative of collective identity are remarkably long-lived (see [Box 17.2](#)). However, this comes with a caveat—it is all too easy to assume that interpretations of geography in identity narratives are fixed, leading to the kind of rigidity that undermines the aims of a grand strategy. Instead, collective meanings and identities are fluid and often politically contested, and are always re-interpreted in particular contexts. Classical geopolitics conceptualized the geographic factor as timeless and universal. However, the basic meaning of geopolitics, the political uses of geography, draws attention to context, which is always situated and specific. Interpretations of geographical factors, just as objective geographic constraints, may be long-lived, but it is the task of the grand strategist to assess how they play out in any given situation.

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### **Key Points**

- Geography is not a fixed and immutable factor in world affairs.
- Technological change affects the way that geographical factors play out in international politics.
- Geographical factors matter both as external constraints and because they are interpreted and politically contested, and often part of identity narratives.
- This duality complicates the uses of geopolitics for grand strategy, but also adds a new, important dimension that makers of grand strategy need to take into account.

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### **Critical Thinking   Debating ... America First**

The US has not substantially reduced its military spending from cold war levels and continues to pursue active, global foreign policies. Trump won the presidential elections in 2016 partly on the promise to end

this practice and ‘put America first’. With financial pressures and recent, unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, should the US pull back from the world?

## For

- ***Favourable geopolitics.*** With two weak and friendly neighbours—Canada and Mexico—and surrounded by open seas, there is no genuine threat to US territory. Its huge nuclear arsenal also acts as a powerful deterrent.
- ***Creating more enemies.*** By aggressively pursuing the ‘war on terror’, the US is already creating more enemies amongst Muslims. An active foreign policy could encourage rivals such as China and Russia into an alliance which could dominate Eurasia—they are already getting closer, partly in response to US actions and are both rearming.
- ***Free-riding allies.*** America’s allies can ‘free-ride’ on US power. NATO members are able to reduce military spending, knowing that they are protected by the US nuclear umbrella; Israel and Taiwan can embark upon risky policies guaranteed by Washington.

## Against

- ***No danger from rival coalitions.*** US military preponderance means it need not worry about coalitions of other powers forming against it. Moreover, China and Russia have a long history of mutual suspicion and the Kremlin might fear dependence on China’s economic might.
- ***Defence technology leverage.*** By maintaining a large defence budget, the US has leverage over other countries which need American technology. Britain, for example, can only purchase certain components of its nuclear deterrent from the US.
- ***Strong, prosperous relationships.*** Alliances such as NATO lessen the likelihood of being dragged into unnecessary wars by creating a network of strong relationships and trust. These alliances and active American engagement in the world guarantee global trade and prosperity. An ‘America First’ approach repels other countries, erodes trust, and could quickly weaken existing alliance structures.

Questions:

1. Should the US pull back and ‘put America first’?
2. Should the US pull back in Asia but increase its presence elsewhere?
3. To what extent is the US in decline as a global superpower?

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## Conclusion

Formulating and implementing a grand strategy in today’s complex international environment is an exceedingly difficult task, and not helped by the fact that geography is not the kind of scientific long-term grounding for grand strategy that the classical geopoliticians imagined. However, this complexity may be the very reason a grand strategy should be attempted. In an evolving international environment, it is dangerous to continue implementing policies and approaches that no longer fit the times. It is equally dangerous to attempt a grand strategy directed at the wrong target, and with an erroneous understanding of what is needed to achieve desired ends—US President George W. Bush’s strategy in the war on terror may serve as an example. Nevertheless, the multiple challenges that affect the world today are so diverse that a concerted attempt to balance ends and means seems more necessary than ever. In democratic states this means that the welfare and prosperity of the nation, in line with the values of the polity, are the ultimate end. Grand strategy is about the right balance between means and ends, not about hedging against all possible threats and winning wars at all costs. In all of this, thinking geopolitically is central, in the most basic sense that geography is central to politics and foreign policy must be geographically focused. However, geographic factors are not an objective and unchanging determinant of world politics. Their political implications may lay precisely in the meanings they carry for particular actors. Perceptions of geographical factors, especially where they involve identity narratives, can be long-lasting, but they are not fixed and the way they become politicized in any particular situation is highly context-dependent. Even though this complicates the relationship between geopolitics and grand strategy, it remains a fundamental factor that the grand strategist has to grapple



with in a challenging and fluid international environment.

## Questions

1. What are the aims of grand strategy?
2. Why is there renewed interest in geopolitics and grand strategy at this particular historical juncture?
3. What explains the emergence of geopolitical thought at the turn of the twentieth century?
4. Compare and contrast evolving definitions of grand strategy and geopolitics. How and why have these definitions changed?
5. To what extent was the grand strategy of containment during the cold war motivated by geopolitical reasoning?
6. What are the problems inherent in formulating grand strategies? Can they be overcome?
7. Why is grand strategy associated with the statecraft of Great Powers?
8. How has geopolitics traditionally been associated with grand strategy? What are the problems of this association?
9. If geopolitics is both about the 'out there' and the 'in here', as Colin Gray has written ([Box 17.1](#)), what is its use for the formulation of grand strategy?
10. Is the rise of China a challenge to US primacy?

## Further Reading

**J. Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2003)** critically investigates the way that modern world politics is underpinned by a European geopolitical imagination associated with the rise of the great powers.

**H. Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014)** is a spirited defence of the idea that grand strategy is both useful and doable, with in-depth case studies of successes and failures in US grand strategy.

**Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New**

**York: Basic Books, 1997)** reformulates Mackinder's heartland theory for the post-cold war world. A classic read by one of the architects of the geopolitical revival in the US.

**C. S. Gray and G. Sloan (eds), *Geopolitics, Geography, and Strategy* (London: Routledge, 1999)** is an edited volume covering a wide range of topics and approaches, from treatments of military strategy to critical reflections on geography and culture.

**J. J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006)** emphasizes the interplay between technological change and geography and analyses in historical case studies how Great Powers have responded to such dramatic geopolitical changes as the discovery of new trade routes and continents.

**P. Kennedy, *The Rise And Fall Of The Great Powers: Economic Change And Military Conflict* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988)** offers a magisterial account of relative economic decline and its effects on world politics that remains essential reading.

**J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2nd updated edn (New York: Norton, 2014)** stresses the pursuit of primacy as a central driving force in world politics. Consistently insightful, with a new chapter on the role of China in world affairs.

**W. Murray, R. H. Sinnreich, and J. Lacey (eds), *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)** is an exploration of grand strategy in history by a group of leading historians, with insightful general discussions of the meaning of grand strategy and the many failures in its implementation.

**S. Reich and P. Dombrowski, *The End of Grand Strategy: US Maritime Operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018)** makes the case against a unitary Grand Strategy for current US foreign policy, arguing that security issues have become far too complex for this in recent years.

## Web Links

International Security Network, University of Zurich <http://www.isn.ethz.ch> contains a wealth of

relevant information, including articles on geopolitics and grand strategy.

Exploring Geopolitics **[http://www.exploringgeopolitics.org/I\\_About.html](http://www.exploringgeopolitics.org/I_About.html)** is a rich resource on classical and contemporary geopolitics, with many interviews with leading academics in the field as well as introductory articles on relevant topics.

*Foreign Policy* magazine **<http://foreignpolicy.com>** analyses US foreign policy, often with an eye for geopolitical questions and discussions of US grand strategy.

Geopolitics and Security, blog run by the Geography department at RHUL,

**<https://rhulgeopolitics.wordpress.com/>** is a blog on current geopolitical themes, interpreted through the lens of critical geopolitics and in particular the ‘popular geopolitical culture’ approach by Klaus Dodds, professor at RHUL. It provides an expanded view of geopolitics as an interpretative frame to understand everything from fake news to the Arctic issue.

New references:

Dombrovski, P. and Reich, S. (2017) ‘Does Donald Trump have a Grand Strategy?’, *International Affairs* 93/5: 1013-1037

IEA World Energy Outlook 2017, available from <https://www.iea.org/weo2017/#section-1-6> (accessed 20/11/2017)

Laub, Z and McBride, J. (2017) ‘The Group of Seven (G7)’, Council on Foreign Relations

Backgrounder. 30/05/2017, available from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/group-seven-g7> (accessed 12/12/2017)